May too easy on oilsands for some Greens; Quebec leader fears loss of voters if party fails to toughen stance

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The federal Green party's openness to continued activity in Alberta's oilsands has created a rift with some supporters - including party leaders in two provinces - who want to rapidly shut down the industry that employs tens of thousands of people and is responsible for a large portion of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions.

Alex Tyrrell, leader of the Green Party of Quebec, is spearheading the dissent and calling on the federal Greens to change their environmental platform ahead of the national election on Oct. 21. In an interview Wednesday, Tyrrell accused federal Green Leader Elizabeth May of being too soft on the oilsands because her party's platform would allow the industry to continue operating for decades to come.

Tyrrell said he agrees with "90 per cent" of the proposals in the plan, but that he's troubled by this aspect of the Green platform that he argued is out of sync with the more ardent side of the environmental movement and will discourage some voters from supporting the federal party.

Two weeks ago, he launched a website calling on May to change the platform and support the "rapid shut down" of the oilsands within the first mandate of a Green government, while investing heavily to support the estimated 140,000 people who work in the industry. The site includes a list of Green members supporting his call, including Saskatchewan Green Leader Shawn Setyo and several current and former Green election candidates.

He said almost 500 people have signed a petition urging the federal party to take a harder stance against the oilsands, and also strengthen the federal carbon price designed by the current Liberal government.

"It's very important for us as a Green party that we oppose the tar sands in the strongest way possible," Tyrrell said.

"The Green party didn't get this far by moderating itself."

Speaking by phone from a community tour in Orillia, Ont., May defended her party's plan as a "hugely ambitious" blueprint for political action to slash emissions in accordance with what the international community of climate scientists has called for. The plan seeks all-party co-operation to tackle the crisis of climate change and rapidly reduce emissions by 60 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030 - double the government's current target - and then to net zero by 2050.

The plan would also halt all new development of fossil fuels in Canada - including multibillion-dollar natural gas export projects - and stop all oil and gas imports from other countries.

In their place, May proposes that Canada use energy that's already produced here for domestic needs while the country shifts to 100 per cent renewable energy.

By 2050, the Greens would ensure all bitumen produced in Canada would be used only for the petrochemical industry, but May said the country will need to stop burning fossil fuels "well before" that.

May suggested Tyrrell is "misunderstanding" the federal platform, and should support the use of Canadian oil that could displace more emissions-intensive imports from places like the United States. She also contested his objection about the Green party's stance on the carbon price, which the federal Greens would continue hiking every year after 2022, when it is scheduled to hit $50 per tonne of emissions.

"As we go off of fossil fuels, we should use Canadian oil so that we also give Canadian workers transition time" to other industries, May said.

"We have to have unleashed a lot of disruptive technologies that mean, by 2050, people won't be looking around for gas stations because there won't be any," she said.

"The goal that's most significant is bringing down greenhouse gas emissions by 60 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030, and (Tyrrell) should really be on board with that. Every climate activist should be on board with that. We're the only party with a goal and a plan to have Canada pay our fair share," May said.

Emissions from extraction in the oilsands have climbed 158 per cent since 2005, and the oil and gas industry was responsible for 27 per cent of total emissions in Canada in 2017, according to the federal government's national tally submitted this year to the United Nations.

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